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ABSTRACT

Findings from analysis of television coverage of women in sport during the 1970's and early 1980's suggested that coverage was considerably less than for men's televised sport, and that coverage of women athletes was characterized by stereotypical images and limited information. Trends reported by researchers who examined the status of women athletes in the mid and late 1980's included limited coverage of women's sports and differences in role portrayal of male and female athletes. To discern prior, current, and future trends regarding televised media coverage of women in sport, a preliminary study was undertaken. Brief questionnaires were submitted to local and national televised media personnel. Coverage of women's sports in the late 1980's and early 1990's continue to be in a secondary position to men's, with less total air time, fewer cameras at each event, second string broadcasters, edited events, and often condescending, trivializing comments. Individual types of sports continue to be featured and presented in a fashion that reinforces a stereotypical image of the female athlete. (IAH)

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Images of Illusion, Images of Reality
Gender Differentials in Televised Sport - the 1980's and Beyond

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Images of Illusion, Images of Reality: Gender Differentials in Televised Sports - the 1980's and Beyond

Women of the 1980's celebrated and enjoyed expanded roles on many fronts, as they participated in the arenas of business and sport on an even broader scale than ever before. Women in the 1980's did not always share the exact same ideals, values, and aspirations, however they did share some common ground. Women still dealt with a dichotomy - the traditional role and the ever expanding demands encountered outside the home and family. Although some important changes were observed in the occupations and social status of women on television, the public was essentially still seeing women in traditional roles. Major trends illuminated by research of televised media of women in sports during the 1980's were indicative of changing images of women, however these changes still reflected the reluctance of society to totally alter its attitudes.

The purpose of this paper is to trace gender images in televised sport throughout the decades of the 1970's and more specifically, the 1980's. It is the intent of the authors to report trends from these previous decades and to also establish potential trends which might provide a perspective for the 1990's and 21st century.

Gender Images in Sport

Acknowledging the power of television and its appeal to the masses, researchers analyzed the extent of coverage of women in

sport during the 1970's and early 1980's (Dyer, 1982; Boutiler and San Giovanni, 1983; & Hilliard, 1984). Findings suggested that coverage of women's sports on television was considerably less than men's televised sports and television audiences were often left with stereotypical images and given limited information regarding women athletes.

Studies were conducted during the mid and later 1980's which ascertained the status of women athletes as portrayed by televised media (Higgs & Weiller, 1987; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Birrell, 1988; Messner, 1988; Higgs & Weiller, 1990). Trends reported by these authors included, a) limited coverage of women's sports, and b) differences in role portrayal of male and female athletes.

Limited coverage of women's sports.

In 1973, a study was conducted by New World Decisions, Ltd. that measured coverage of women's sports by examining NBC sports programming between August 1972 and September 1973. The study revealed there were 366 total hours of sports broadcasting. However, just one hour, the Wimbledon final, was of women's sports. How does this compare with the 1980's? The authors conducted a similar study to ascertain whether women's sports were shown more extensively by NBC during the 1980's. NBC seasons of 1982-1983 and 1988-1989 were examined.

Insert table 1 about here

During the 1982-1983 season, NBC televised a total of 380 hours of sports coverage. Of the 380 total hours, 372 (98%) were exclusively devoted to men's sports. Eight hours of 2% were exclusively devoted to women's sport.

During the 1988-1989 season (discounting the Olympic Games) there were 442 hours of sports programming shown by NBC. Less than 5% (21 1/2) hours was devoted to women's sports. As in the 1982-1983 season, sports televised were golf, tennis, skating, and gymnastics. Of the 408 hours of men's sports televised, dominant sports were professional and collegiate football, professional baseball, and golf. There were approximately 12.5 hours which were not specifically delineated exclusively as men's or women's sports. These are represented in an unclear or mixed category.

Insert table 2 about here

Both men's and women's sports experienced a substantial increase over the two decades, however coverage of men's events increased 43 hours whereas women's events increased 33 hours. Although the number of women's sports presented by NBC increased substantially from the 1970's to the latter 1980's, the sports

presented still essentially reflected the individual nature of what was acceptable for women's sports on television.

Additional studies comparing limited total coverage and limited uninterrupted coverage of women's and men's sporting events were also conducted during the 1980's (Weiller & Higgs, 1990). The 1983 and 1987 Pan American Games and the 1986 and 1987 Ironman Triathlons were found to be excellent examples of both limited total coverage and limited uninterrupted coverage of women's sports by the televised media. During a random sample of more than 20 hours of televised coverage of the Pan American Games, males were featured 69% of the total time, twice that shown for women. Similarly in the 1986 and 1987 Ironman Triathlons, males were covered 50% more than were females, and were featured for a longer uninterrupted time frame.

Timing and location (major network vs cable station) of televised sporting events can be critical to audience reception. Far too often men's events are shown during prime time and are more extensively covered than are women's events. Sports played by both sexes, particularly individual sports, such as tennis and golf, are often presented as men's tournaments. Examples of these points were found in the 1980's in major tennis tournaments such as Wimbledon and the U.S. Open and in the NCAA men's and women's basketball championships of 1986-1988. Men's matches or tournaments were featured on major networks at prime time hours, whereas women's events were often televised on cable stations at less popular hours. The implication of both the timing of

programming and network location is that men's sports are more important, with the best being saved for last.

Differences in role portrayal of male and female athletes.

Differences in role portrayal of male and female athletes can include a wide variety of aspects such as descriptors of the athletes, including adjectives used to describe competitors and commentary regarding clothing of competitors. Examples of differentials in role portrayal across the decade of the 1980's were found during the 1985 and 1986 marathon sections of the Ironman Triathlons and the 1984 - 1987 NCAA basketball championships, the 1983 and 1987 Pan American Games, and the 1988 Olympic Games (Weiller & Higgs, 1992).

Adjectives used to describe male and female competitors in the 1985 and 1986 marathon sections of the Ironman Triathlons and the 1987 NCAA basketball championships were found to be noticeably different. Examples included: a) "he was strong, aggressive, and unstoppable," whereas "she was running in a world of pain"; and b) "he was the best freshman in the country"; "she was the best little center in women's basketball." Other examples of differences in role portrayal found during the 1980's included references to women athletes as "girls," "little darlings," "sweet," "pretty," and "graceful." Commentators often focused on the fashion of Flo Jo during the 1988 Olympic Games, adding almost as an afterthought her superb ability as an athlete. Throughout the 1980's, sports commentators continued to call women athletes by their first names or first names plus

surname, whereas in men's sporting events, athletes were primarily referred to by their surnames. Although these may appear to be relatively minor points, the inferiority of women athletes compared to their male counterparts is constantly being emphasized.

Ambivalent portrayals.

In the 1980's, although the glamour girl myth was still a very real part of the way in which women were represented in television and in televised sports, there were some definite changes that occurred. Together with traditional portrayals of women in sports, there were subtle differences as to coverage of women on a different level. Studies by Duncan (1986) and by Duncan and Hasbrook (1988) reported that women were portrayed in both positive and negative ways by media in the Olympic Games. Although commentators utilized adjectives describing grace and beauty, adjectives were also used which denoted power, superiority, aggression, strength and quickness. Perhaps one of the major reasons for this ambivalent portrayal of women in sport, is that the majority of commentators have in the past been male. As more female commentators assume a primary role, quality of commentating may improve. This ambivalent portrayal represents a definite positive shift toward the viability of women as athletes.

1990's

Spectator sports have been and are still built on the premise that the spectator is viewing the best possible players. How do the early and mid 1980's compare with the late 1980's and early 1990's in televised portrayal of women's and men's sports? Duncan, Messner, Williams, and Jensen (1990) investigated gender stereotyping in televised sports. An interesting finding disclosed by Duncan, et al., was the limited use of overt gender stereotyping and sexist language. Although the portrayal of women's sports by the televised media is still trivialized and marginalized when compared with men's sports, there appears to be a change in the blatant differentiation of male and female athletes by television commentators.

Are women's sports being televised more extensively during the 1990's? In an effort to address this issue, Weiller, Higgs & Meyer (1992) investigated NBC programming during the 1990-1991 season. A total of 569 hours of sports programming were televised by NBC during the 1990-1991 season, representing an increase of 127 hours over the 88-89 season. Of the 569 total hours, 379.5 (67%) were specifically identified as featuring men. A total of 27.5 hours or approximately 5% were exclusively devoted to women's sports. Of the total number of hours televised, approximately 161 hours were not clearly identifiable as exclusively featuring males or females. These are represented in a mixed or unclear category. As in previous seasons, men's sports were primarily televised during Saturday and Sunday

afternoon. However, it must also be pointed out that women's events were also televised during these prime hours as well.

Insert table 3 about here

In comparing programming across the 70's, 80's, and early 90's, NBC increased total sports programming by over 200 hours. Interestingly, sports programming over the decades increased 13 more hours for women than for men. Although the gap between number of hours of men's events to number of hours of women's events has slowly narrowed, as the ratio on Table 4 reveals, extensive disparity still exists.

Insert table 4 about here

The increase in televised sports for women is substantial. However, as these figures attest, glaring differences still exist in the amount of women's and men's sports programming provided by the televised media.

Televised media has sought to satisfy the American public's desire to see more and more sporting events. This is evident in the increased number of hours of sports programming over the decades. Media has also provided us with a wider variety of sports. As demonstrated through this preliminary study, although the gap between total number of hours of men's sports programming and women's sports programming is great, it

does appear to be narrowing considerably. However, while there has been an increase in the total number of hours televised for women, we are still seeing sports which reflect aesthetically pleasing activities; ones which support a traditional, acceptable sport role for women.

The public's perception of sport is shaped by what the televised media chooses to present to us. In an effort to discern prior, current, and future trends regarding televised media coverage of women in sport, the investigators undertook a preliminary study. Brief questionnaires were submitted to televised media personnel on both a local and national level. Responses were obtained from sport producers, sports casters, and sports reporters. The results were most interesting, insightful and disconcerting.

Insert table 5 about here

Question one asked media personnel how they felt the coverage of women's sports had changed since the 1970's. Some of the respondents felt that coverage of women's sports had not changed dramatically since the early 1970's. Others felt although the coverage of women's sports had improved, there was still no dramatic increase in the quality and frequency of women's sports programming. Cable TV was perceived as a positive force in the coverage of women's events, however the tendency appeared to be towards coverage of aesthetically pleasing,

individual activities. Several respondents expressed a need for contracts for women's events to be negotiated separately from men's.

Insert table 6 about here

The second question asked individuals to describe their views regarding present coverage of women's sports by televised media. Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that there was not currently sufficient coverage of women's sporting events on television. Some respondents linked this to a lack of interest by advertisers to sponsor women's events. Several respondents indicated a "once a year" showing such as the NCAA Final Four was not enough exposure to garner audience support and demand.

Insert table 7 about here

The third question reflected differences in present coverage of men's and women's sporting events by televised media. Major differences were focused on type, amount, and quality of coverage. Respondents indicated a disparate amount of coverage of men's and women's events, not only in total time allotted, but in time slot allocations as well. They [respondents] noted that in men's broadcasts, commentators used words denoting strength and courage, whereas in women's events, use of a tough word was viewed as an offense. Technological differences were also

identified. Respondents suggested fewer cameras were used in women's sporting events and women's events were often edited and tape delayed.

Insert table 8 about here

The fourth question allowed respondents to voice their opinions on steps which needed to be taken to improve the amount and quality of coverage of women athletes by televised media. Suggestions included:

1) More women need to be in production/on the air/and at the executive and programming levels in sports

2) There needs to be an increase in the financial base of women's sports

3) In order to create a demand from viewers - there needs to be more exposure from televised media for women's sporting events

4) Respondents felt there was a limited base of support from female viewers for more women's sports - this needed to be improved upon, and

5) One respondent felt women must "learn the politics of staying on the air"

Insert table 9 about here

The final question asked media personnel to identify what they perceived to be trends in coverage of women in sports in this decade and into the 21st century. Our respondents felt that coverage of some women's sports would slowly increase, however many commented that the future television coverage of women's sports would be bleak unless networks made a stronger concerted effort to make women more visible. Most agreed that unless viable sponsorship opportunities for women were developed, there would be no dramatic increase in the coverage and quality of women's sports.

Although there appears to have been improvements in amount, type, and quality of coverage of women's sports, the overall picture has not significantly improved. However, as one respondent noted, women's sports are still in an infant stage, with much room for growth. One respondent summed up the views of many by indicating that as long as programming executives look to the men in the world as their only potential audience, they will continue to produce what men want to see and which women's sports the audience demands.

Conclusion

During the 1980's and into the early 1990's women's sports appeared to be gaining ground both in total numbers and in recognition. Overt sexist comments regarding women athletes appeared to be fewer in number, however subtle, traditional trivialization of the presence of women's sporting events did not significantly improve.

Naisbitt and Auburdene (1990) stated, "Although we do fully realize it as yet, men and women are playing on an equal playing field in corporate America" (p. 217). Women are no longer a numerical minority, but remain so because of deeply rooted and powerful attitudes. The 1980's and early 1990's appear to have been good to the average woman, opportunities existed that were not there in the 70's and early 80's and women did make strides toward equality. We saw increasing air time and prize money, yet sponsorship for women's athletics was not largely forthcoming.

The information presented here can in no way represent all network coverage, however coverage of women's sporting events does appear to be headed in a positive direction. It still remains apparent, however that the goal of equity lauded by the women's movement is still along way off. Unfortunately, the late 1980's and early 1990's, still found women's sports in a secondary position to men's, with less total air time, fewer cameras at each event, second string broadcasters, edited events, and often condescending, trivializing comments. Types of sports (individual) continued to be featured and were presented in a fashion which reinforced a stereotypical image of the female athlete. These problems have no quick fix. Realistically, it is unlikely equality of media exposure will happen in this decade. If change is to occur for women in sport, it must be part of a much deeper change that encompasses society as a whole. As one prominent respondent to our question which addressed the future of women's sports (in the 1990's) stated, " Women will get

stronger, faster, and more successful . . . Madison avenue will realize their earning potential . . ." Perhaps the 1990's will facilitate this change, although decades of oppression will be hard to remove.

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Table 1

NBC Coverage of Men's and Women's Sports Events.

	1972-1973	1982-1983	1988-1989
Total hrs.	366	380	442
Men's events (hrs)	365	372	408
Women's events (hrs)	1	8	21.5
Unclear/Mixed	-	-	12.5

Table 2

Comparison of coverage of NBC seasons, 1970's & 1980's.

	72-73 to 82-83	82-83 to 88-89	72-73 to 88-89
Total hrs.	14	62	76
Men's events(hrs)	7	36	43
Women's events(hrs)	7	13.5	14.5

Table 3

NBC Sports Programming '70's; '80's; '90's

	72-73	82-83	88-89	90-91
Total hrs.	366	380	442	569
Men's events (hrs)	365	372	408	379.5
Women's events (hrs)	1	8	21.5	28.5
Unclear/Mixed	-	-	12.5	161

Table 4

Ratio of men's to women's sports programming

1982-1983	1988-1989	1990-1991
46.5/1	18.9/1	13.3/1

Table 5

Q: Coverage of women's sports since 1970's?

- o No dramatic change in number and quality of events
- o Cable TV - positive step
- o Better commentators; interest & coverage improved
- o Need to negotiate separate TV contracts for women's events

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Table 6

Q: Sufficient coverage of women athletes on television?

- There is not sufficient coverage
- Many sports are overlooked
- Need for consistency in televising; need for sponsorship of women's events

Table 7

Q: Major differences between TV coverage of men's & women's events

o Differences in type, amount, & quality of coverage
o Differences in money spent
o Technological differences in coverage
o Team sports - men; individual sports - women

Table 8

Q: Steps to improve amount & quality of coverage of women athletes in televised sports

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- o More women needed in programming, on air, executive level
- o Increase in financial base of support
- o Demand from viewing public

Table 9

Q: Trends for the 1990's?

- Networks must make concerted effort
- More opportunities for women journalists
- No change unless women's sports are marketed for sponsors and advertisers